

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

An Argument at the Piano and a Child's Heaven

Saturday, February 13, 2027 · 15:30 · Musikverein

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor · Yuja Wang, piano · Christiane Karg, soprano

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26</i>	28'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 4 in G major</i>	60'
	TOTAL MUSIC	88'

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26

28 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Sergei Prokofiev carried the ideas for his Third Piano Concerto around for years before he wrote it down. The earliest sketches go back to 1913, when he wrote a theme with variations and

put it aside, and he returned to the material in 1916 and 1917. By the time he finished the piece he had left Russia and was living between the United States and western Europe. The concerto was finally put together in the summer of 1921 at Saint-Brevin-les-Pins, a village on the coast of Brittany.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The concerto opens quietly. A solo clarinet plays a long, unhurried melody, the orchestra joins in, and then the strings start to scurry upwards until the piano bursts in at full speed. A second idea arrives with a drier, more sarcastic edge, with dissonances and a strutting rhythm. Midway through, the opening clarinet melody returns in the full orchestra, and the piano decorates it before the fast music takes over again and races to the end.

The middle movement is a theme with five variations, unusual in a concerto. The orchestra alone states the theme, a prim little dance in the manner of a gavotte. The piano's first variation begins with a long trill and a run up the keyboard. The second and third are fast and rhythmically spiky, with accents pushed off the beat. The fourth is the still centre of the piece, a slow, dreamlike exchange between piano and orchestra. The fifth is energetic, and at the end the theme comes back at its original pace in the orchestra while the piano skitters around it.

Prokofiev called the finale an argument between piano and orchestra. Bassoons and plucked strings propose a theme, the piano cuts in with its own, and the two keep contradicting each other. Then the woodwinds bring a broad, lyrical melody, which the piano at first seems to mock and then takes up at full volume. The closing pages are the hardest in the work, a contest of speed that ends on a loud chord of C major.

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 4 in G major

60 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony grew backwards from its ending. In 1892 he wrote a song for voice and orchestra, "Das himmlische Leben" ("The Heavenly Life"), on a text from Des Knaben Wunderhorn, the collection of German folk poetry that fed much of his early music. The poem is a child's picture of heaven: there is dancing and singing, the saints look after the kitchen, and nobody goes hungry. For a time Mahler meant the song to close his enormous Third Symphony. He took it out again, although traces of it remain in that work, and kept it for something else.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony begins with sleigh bells and flutes and then relaxes into an easy-going melody for the violins. The first movement keeps to a classical outline, and the tunes come one after another, light on their feet. The sleigh bells return several times as a kind of marker, and they will come back in the finale.

The second movement is a scherzo that Mahler first headed “Freund Hein spielt auf”: Friend Hein, a folk-tale name for Death, strikes up on his fiddle. The leader of the orchestra plays a second violin tuned a whole tone higher than normal, which gives it a thin, harsh edge, like a village fiddle. Alma Mahler connected the idea with Arnold Böcklin’s self-portrait, in which Death plays the violin at the painter’s ear. The effect is more uncanny than frightening, and twice a gentler trio pushes the fiddler aside.

The slow movement, which Mahler thought the best he had written, is a set of variations on a calm melody, interrupted twice by a lament in the minor. The variations get shorter and more restless until, near the end, the whole orchestra bursts out in a blaze of E major, as if a door had been thrown open. Then the music settles again.

The finale follows quietly. The soprano sings the Wunderhorn song with the simplicity of a child telling a story, and between the verses the sleigh bells rush in again, now with some bite. The last verse, about the music of heaven, turns to E major, and the symphony ends there, very quietly.

Tonight's artists

Yuja Wang *piano*

Wang is the soloist in the Prokofiev at both Musikverein concerts, on 13 and 14 February, and again when the orchestra takes this programme to Carnegie Hall in New York on 27 February.

Yuja Wang, born in Beijing in 1987, is one of the most dazzling and charismatic pianists in the world. Trained at the Central Conservatory in Beijing and the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, she had her breakthrough in 2007 when, aged twenty, she stepped in for Martha Argerich with the Boston Symphony, and she has been a star of the concert platform ever since. An exclusive Deutsche Grammophon artist and a Grammy winner, she is celebrated for a phenomenal, seemingly effortless technique, electrifying stage presence and fearless musicianship across a vast repertoire, with the great virtuoso Russian concertos among her specialities.

Christiane Karg *soprano*

Karg sings the song that closes Mahler's Fourth, a part she has also performed with the Munich Philharmonic and the Concertgebouw Orchestra. A week later she returns as the soprano soloist in the orchestra's performances of the Second Symphony.

Christiane Karg is a German soprano, born in Feuchtwangen in Bavaria in 1980. She studied at the Mozarteum in Salzburg and made her Salzburg Festival debut in 2006 while still a student, in two early Mozart works. From 2008 she was a member of the Frankfurt Opera ensemble, where her roles included Susanna, Pamina, Zdenka in *Arabella* and Debussy's *Mélisande*. She has since sung lyric soprano parts at houses including the Royal Opera House, La Scala and the Bavarian State Opera, and she is equally active as a concert and Lieder singer. She is artistic director of the KunstKlang festival in her home town.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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Version 1, 7 October 2026